

The Anthropology of Wyndham Lewis

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INTRODUCTION

This essay examines anthropological aspects of some of the non-fiction writings of Wyndham Lewis.¹ Though known as a painter, novelist, and critic, Lewis was also a serious ethnographer and ethnologist, a fact that has escaped the attention of institutional anthropology.

There are, however, a few flattering mentions of Lewis scattered here and there in the anthropological literature. In his essay on the cultural construction of time, Irving Hallowell appraises Lewis's *Time and Western Man* as a 'tour de force', though he does not venture to discuss the contents of the book.² *Time and Western Man* is also reported to have been one of linguist Edward Sapir's favorite books, but Sapir wrote nothing about Lewis.³ In a paper on the anthropology of Shakespeare, Richard Halpern characterizes Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox* as 'brilliantly perverse', although he provides no explanation as to why it should be so.⁴ In an extensive review article on theories of race and ethnicity, the African-American anthropologist Brackette Williams quotes approvingly from Lewis's *Paleface* more than once.⁵ That is about the extent of Lewis's impact on anthropology.

Yet Lewis's status as anthropologist can legitimately be claimed in three ways. First, there is Lewis the ethnographer, observer of human behaviour. His earliest short works of fiction are semi-ethnographic. His 'travel book', *Filibusters in Barbary*, is actually a full-length ethnography of Morocco, though unrecognized as such. Second, there is Lewis the ethnologist, theorist of culture and society. Among Lewis's several contributions to ethnology is his theory of race as cultural construct. Third, Lewis was a reformer. He sought to instill a sense of solidarity among fellow Europeans bent on destroying each other. If, as Edward Tylor proclaimed, anthropology is the 'reformer's science' *par excellence*, then Lewis's anthropology was a sustained critique of war *and* the inane justifications used in waging it.

LEWIS THE ETHNOGRAPHER

In his second autobiography, *Rude Assignment*, Lewis recounts how the trips he took from 1904 to 1906 to Brittany, Spain, and Germany, from his home base in Paris, nurtured a preference for the company of foreigners.⁶ The Russian émigrés who animated the cafes of Paris enthralled the young Lewis. He was impressed by the intensity of their philosophical and political convictions. Lewis fashioned his early writings on Dostoyevsky. It was during these trips that he developed the feelings of solidarity with fellow Europeans that were to inform much of his later work. (156–60)

Lewis's earliest published works are semi-fictional, semi-ethnographic short stories depicting Polish, Russian, German, and other European immigrants living among the Breton-speaking natives of Brittany. Lewis greatly valued these early stories, enough so that he rewrote them and published them in 1927 as *The Wild Body*, a compelling collection of stories.

Bernard Lafourcade writes that these early stories, such as *A Breton Journal*, ‘transferred the somber abstract mood of Lewis’s early sonnets into the more concrete observation of primitive celebrations.’⁷ ‘What I started to do in Brittany I have been developing ever since’, Lewis wrote in *Rude Assignment*.⁸

A fascination with primitive ritual plays a generative role in Lewis’s book *Hitler*. The initial stimuli for the book were Lewis’s observations of a ‘strange political unrest’. He begins with an account of a major ritual event he had attended – a Nazi political rally at which both Goebbels and Goering spoke. Lewis describes the feeling generated by the rally as being ‘like the physical pressure of one immense, indignant thought’.⁹ In comparison to other mass political movements which Lewis had personally witnessed, such as Mussolini’s March on Rome or the onset of the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi rally had ‘an unmistakable accent of passion and of impressive conviction [...] not met with before upon the European scene’. (5)

The ethnographic component of *Hitler*, the empirical dimension, is basic to Lewis’s analysis and underlines it as a work of anthropology. It outlines in vivid strokes the utopian dimension of Nazism before Nazi society was born. It is, in fact, an account of a veritable revitalization movement, a staple subject matter of ethnography for well over a century. Referred to as a ‘slapdash’ collection of dispatches by Fredric Jameson, *Hitler* has the feel of lightly edited field notes, recordings of immediate impressions jotted down in cafes or hotel rooms, rather than of a considered and polished work.¹⁰

The pinnacle of Lewis’s ethnography, though, is *Filibusters in Barbary*, a report of travels through Morocco. As C.J. Fox discerns, ‘we are in the company of a satirist who was, one could say, a natural sociologist.’¹¹ *Filibusters in Barbary* is based on four months of travel around Morocco, backed by Lewis’s usually rigorous background research. Lewis draws up an anthropological roadmap of Morocco. He profiles the major cities – Oran, Casablanca, Marrakech – and towns – Tlemcen, Agadir, Mogador. He visually and sociologically describes the major ethnic groups – Arab, Jew, Turk, Berber, French – providing, in the process, an analysis of the malleability of ethnic identity via dress and historical context. Along the way the reader encounters dozens of characters animated by Lewis’s inimitable literary craft. We are treated to a dissection of Moroccan politics, highlighted by the tension between the French-backed central government, controlled by the Arab sultan at Rabat, and the dispersed Berber tribes of Northern and Southern Morocco, organized then as now, under their various chiefs.

What makes *Filibusters* an invaluable document from the perspective of reflexive anthropology is that in it Lewis produces a kind of ethnographic narrative unavailable to professional anthropologists of his era. Rhetorical conventions of the discipline dictated that ethnographies were to report on the observed behaviour of a tribe, community or behavioural phenomena that could be substantiated, in theory, by other researchers. Factors such as the influence of colonialism, or the experience and effect of the participant observer, were left without being discussed or were relegated to memoirs or diaries, often posthumously published. The anthropologist Carleton Coon, who was doing his own fieldwork in Morocco at around the time Lewis was there, resorted

to writing novels to communicate truths that could not be disclosed in 'scientific' ethnographic form.¹² The strict separation of the scientific, ethnographic observer from the emotional, private individual continues to be a sensitive issue within the profession.

For example, American anthropologist Paul Rabinow's bashful disclosure of his visit to a brothel during fieldwork appeared not in his ethnography of Morocco but rather in his more widely read *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*.¹³ Lewis, by contrast, freed from the rhetorical stance and generic conventions of anthropology could unleash his satirist's whip while simultaneously delivering some profound sociological syntheses. This notion extended to forbidden subject matter. For Anglo-Saxon readers of ethnography and travel writing of the period, Berber brothels were considered unfair sociological game, a fact which made Lewis feel duty-bound to describe them in some detail. He writes: 'One brothel [...] was like a large mud-built pigsty; or like the empty many-celled souks you come upon in the bled, only made of adobe instead of stone. It was quite open, or seemed so. Each cell contained a woman – I saw it about noon, I walked down this repulsive tropical lane, full of fierce house-flies: a stout snore came from each sty.'¹⁴

With cinematic vividness Lewis describes his visit to a brothel in the company of three Italians. 'Our hostess was extremely grave and the small cell was oppressive with her matter-of-factness', Lewis writes. (162–3) As she hurriedly undresses at the urging of one of the older ex-Legionnaires, Lewis inquires about her distended, obviously pregnant stomach. She called it her 'colonial stomach'. With an artist's eye Lewis details the layout and personnel of the brothel: 'The other women we had seen were savage blowzy bundles of gray rags – battered old flowers of the bled, a fat Jewess, with beady eyes in a mask of pallid dough', Lewis writes. (164) He refers to other, famously bad and filthy brothels as hubs of venereal disease, patronized by the mostly German soldiers of the French Foreign Legion. He speculates that the Roman Legionaries at Volubilis must have looked a lot like the German soldiers in the French Foreign Legion at the present time. (162)

LEWIS THE ETHNOLOGIST

Many writers have described their experiences in distant lands, but what makes Lewis a serious anthropologist, rather than a simple travel writer, is that he approaches everything with immense ethnological knowledge. Lewis researched his subjects with a scholarly fervor. In *Filibusters* he confidently asserts that 'before I set foot in Maghreb I knew more about the inhabitants of, say, the hinterland of Tetouan than they know themselves'. (15) When he gets to Algeria Lewis insists on being 'better documented than most guides, although I had never so much as seen an Arab before, except in France selling carpets.' (16) With respect to Bedouin architecture, Lewis writes, 'for the kind of art that I have always practised, the art of design, founded as it is – like the severe linear art of the Renaissance Masters or the Greeks – upon a constant, in the truest sense scientific, study of Nature, qualifies me far better than many professional ethnologists to pronounce myself in a matter of this nature.'¹⁵

When describing in detail say, a Spanish face or the Saharan topography, there is always, with Lewis, an historical argument, a sociological debate, a reply to Herodotus or Ibn Khaldun¹⁶ looming in the background. Why, ponders Lewis, did the Berbers – a ‘true nation’ like the Greeks, Persians or Arabs – never become masters in their own land? This question, posed by Ibn Khaldun five centuries earlier, Lewis attempts to answer. Questions of culture, nation, ethnicity, and race preoccupied Lewis from beginning to the end.

Lewis’s account of Morocco provides a model application of what is called ‘the comprehensive perspective’ of anthropology. A key term of the discipline as taught in universities today, ‘comprehensive’ means looking at human behaviour or culture from all possible angles – biological, ecological, social, political, aesthetic, religious, and so forth. Lewis reports with some pride that he had learned to recognize the indigenous ass and the indigenous black-haired goat as distinct from the imported varieties. He details the social and ecological implications of pastoral nomadism and transhumance, modes of subsistence practiced by Berbers tribes of Africa – but under a French colonial regime. Lewis unravels the multiplex interconnections between culture and habitat, a practical demonstration of cultural ecology long before that theoretical perspective was named and absorbed within normal paradigms of anthropological research in the 1960s and 1970s.

For Lewis, as for anthropology, race is central to understanding how the human world works. It is important not as a biological category but rather as a cultural construct, or ideology. Lewis’s theory of race is first elaborated in 1926, in *The Art of Being Ruled*. There he makes a critique of the origins of classical Greek democracy, an institution based on race and slavery, with the rulers comprising a private club at the top of a social hierarchy.¹⁷ Race, according to Lewis, is the basis of caste and is at the origin of the category of gentleman, a ‘race notion’ that was based on Roman citizenship and aristocratic privilege. (110)

Lewis declares that, ‘Class always takes with it the idea of race, then, and of some distant or recent conquest.’ (110) For Lewis race is the more fundamental organizing principle than is class, in opposition to Marxist class theory. In *Hitler*, Lewis writes, ‘Once a Celt, always a Celt – whatever Celt may be. But the metal-worker may be a Bookie’s clerk tomorrow, and later on might take to the sea.’¹⁸ For Lewis, the development of modern science and technology render class a far less enduring principle of identity-formation than is race, however mythical the latter tends to be.

Lewis extends his analysis of race in *The Lion and the Fox*, a critical study that situates Shakespeare’s drama within a wider historical context – the co-mingling of Celtic and Saxon peoples into a single British nation. For Lewis there were no such things as separate Celtic and Saxon races. He debunks the notion with help from the latest scientific anthropology. He dismisses Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* as an ethnologically worthless book because it subscribes to racial ideologies that falsely posit an innate distinction between ‘creeping’ Saxons and ‘magical’ Celts.¹⁹

Lewis’s account of the concentration of Celtic elements in the west of Britain, and Saxon

elements in the east, parallels the concept of ‘cline’ as used in current biological anthropology. Clines are distributions, or mappings, of selected human physical features, such as hair colour or blood type, over geographic space. Thus, Celtic elements would be most concentrated in the west, where they were driven by the expanding Saxon. Yet there is no strict separation between Celt and Saxon. No simple line of demarcation can be drawn between the two, especially after centuries of intermarriage. All this is transparent to Lewis’s eye, which convinces him that the Irish and the English are the same people – except in the Welsh and Scottish highlands and in Western Ireland, where ‘little dark people’, the original Celtic population, survived. (323) He finds it humorous that Shaw, the descendant, no doubt, of the Viking invaders of Ireland, plays the public role of ‘the Celt’. For Lewis the whole notion of a Celtic ‘race snobbery’ is fatuous because it is based on something that does not exist. (326)

Lewis viewed the intermingling of Celt and Saxon, instead, as precisely the kind of *cultural* matrix that would allow a genius like Shakespeare to grow. He writes: ‘Any analysis of a great creative period [...] must have this chaotic spot in its centre; the incalculable factor of racial intermixture. For it needs only a few men, or even one man, to give a novel turn and a strange power to a supposedly “national” movement.’ (298)

Lewis’s theory of race meshes with his theory of personality. In *The Lion and the Fox*, he writes: ‘Not only genius, as we call the greatest development of conscious personality, but all personality, is raceless for all practical purposes: for the characteristic work of personality is to overcome the mechanical ascendancy of what is imposed on it by birth and environment.’ (296) How different this view of personality is from the cultural determinism of the ‘culture and personality’ school of anthropology of the 1920s and 1930s. Lewis prefigures by a half century the now fashionable ‘action’ and ‘practice’ theories thrown up as antidotes to determinisms of all stripes.

Lewis’s views on race may come as a surprise to those who would reduce him to a fascist sympathizer. In *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis outlines his views on race: ‘Today race and colour are as distinctive features as ever: and it is unlikely in the future that race will cease to play its part in the formation of class – as, again, many simple white people will discover to their great chagrin. But the character of our civilization, as defined by the great discoveries of modern science, with their unifying effect, must tend very rapidly not only to world-wide standardization, but to racial fusion.’ (ABR 109)

LEWIS THE REFORMER

What facts underpinned Lewis’s reformist anthropology? Why such an interest in race and ethnicity? Was it a strange obsession, as some believe, or was it something more fundamental?

Lewis was a soldier in the British Army during the First World War. He fought with the artillery and witnessed close at hand the massive and senseless waste of life. He denounced the Great War as a war of money – in contrast to the Second World War, which he regarded as a war of ideology. Lewis’s war experience galvanized his main reformist impulse, which was

to adopt an uncompromising anti-war posture – without reservation or exception. He could not fathom why people, especially those of the same racial stock, should resort to murdering each other on such a tragically grand scale. In *Paleface*, he wrote: ‘It has always been fratricidal that these people should be taught to disembowel, blind and poison each other on the score of their quite imaginary “differences” of blood or mind, but today there is less excuse for it than ever before.’²⁰ He regarded the Great War as a civil war. For Lewis, ephemeral differences of language, culture, and national politics separated people who should properly regard one another as kin.

Towards a solution Lewis proposes the setting up of a European melting pot, on the model of America. Fusion with Africa and Asia could be considered after this initial European experiment. Lewis asks: ‘What can there be against it, except that it would be impossible to have wars any more in Europe?’ (276) He argues that mating among American whites from various European nations has produced a hybrid vigour with the same effect that interbreeding had among European nobility: ‘the best of several closely allied stocks have met in him.’ (279) Lewis also emphasizes his staunch opposition to forced miscegenation. He sees Anglo-Saxon Protestant racism as more virulent, and more hostile to racial mixing than the Latin Catholic variety, yet points to European nationalism as the birthplace of American racism of all kinds. (283)

Taken together, Lewis’s writings on race perform the same kind of work as that of the many professional anthropologists who act as advocates for their (usually oppressed) subjects – dispossessed indigenous tribes, peasant villagers, industrial proletariats, lumpenproletariats, and the like. Anthropologists have too often found themselves fighting to have their subjects recognized as fully human in countries likely to regard them as vermin, or at best obstacles to progress. Lewis’s ‘natives’ – his ‘tribe’, ‘his’ people, the people on whose behalf he advocated – are his own beleaguered fellow-Europeans – German common folk, French colonial military personnel, Berber tribesmen. That he even includes the Berbers, some possessed of the darkest skin pigmentation, testifies the extent to which Lewis was willing to redraw racial boundaries. Though he did not invent the theory of the European origins of the Berbers, Lewis argued it vigorously in *Filibusters*. Repudiated by some anthropologists, the theory of European origins has recently gained new Berber adherents and represents one manifestation of a counter-hegemonic movement directed against the Moroccan Arab élites with their capital in Rabat.²¹ Recent research in biological anthropology suggests that since late Paleolithic times there have been several major expansions of human populations from Europe into North Africa, punctuated by smaller expansions from Africa into Europe.²² So Lewis was not so totally wrong, after all, and may actually be more right than wrong about something on which there is no scholarly consensus today.

CONCLUSION

That Lewis could add the title of ‘anthropologist’ to his list of achievements is nothing special in itself. What is impressive, and worthy of greater exploration, is that Lewis’s anthropology

routinely prefigured developments in the field, by decades in some cases. He was avant-garde not just in art and literature, but in social and cultural theory too. When looked at from the perspective of his reformism, Lewis's concern with race and ethnicity had more to do with dousing the flames of another World War, and with fostering feelings of fraternal love, than it did with drawing exclusionary boundaries. Lewis was in his practice the model anthropologist – an observer of human behaviour, a cultural theorist, and an advocate for progressive change.²³

NOTES

- 1 A slightly different version of this paper was read on 25 January, 2008 at the *Wyndham Lewis: Modernity and Critique* conference held at the Birmingham and Midlands Institute, Birmingham, UK.
- 2 A. Irving Hallowell, 'Temporal Orientation in Western Civilization and in a Pre-Literate Society', *American Anthropologist* 39, 4, Part 1 (1937), 650.
- 3 Richard Handler, 'Anti-Romantic Romanticism: Edward Sapir and the Critique of American Individualism', *Anthropological Quarterly* 61, 4, Culture Theory and Cultural Criticism in Boasian Anthropology (1988), 1–13.
- 4 Richard Halpern, 'Shakespeare in the Tropics: From High Modernism to New Historicism', *Representations* 45 (1994), 5.
- 5 Brackette F. Williams, 'A Class Act: Anthropology and the Race to Nation Across Ethnic Terrain', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18, 1 (1989), 433–434.
- 6 Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay ([1950] Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), pp. 120–122.
- 7 Lewis, Wyndham, *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), p. 192.
- 8 Quoted by Lafourcade in *The Complete Wild Body*, p. v.
- 9 Wyndham Lewis, *Hitler* (1931; New York: Gordon Press, 1972), p. 11.
- 10 Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1979), p. 179.
- 11 C.J. Fox, 'Lewis as Travel Writer: The Forgotten *Filibusters in Barbary*', in *Wyndham Lewis: A Reevaluation*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (London: The Athlone Press, 1980), p. 175.
- 12 Nancy J. Schmidt, 'Carleton Coon: A Pioneer in Anthropological Literary Genres', *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 19, 2 (1985), 40–45.
- 13 Paul Rabinow's ethnography is *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). His fieldwork memoirs are *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).
- 14 Wyndham Lewis, *Filibusters in Barbary* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1932), pp. 162–63.

- 15 Wyndham Lewis, *Journey into Barbary: Morocco Writings and Drawings of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. C.J. Fox (Santa Barbara CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1983), p. 191. This edition edits the main text, and adds unpublished material.
- 16 Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 AD) was one of the greatest Arab and Muslim scholars of the medieval world. Accomplished in several disciplines, Khaldun is widely considered to be the first modern social theorist. In his *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomenon) to world history Khaldun provides a history of the Berbers which was based in part on his personal, quasi-ethnographic experience travelling among the peoples of the Maghreb in North Africa. From an élite family, Khaldun was also a life-long and cunning politician whose fortunes and adventures on the world's greatest political stages are recorded in his famous autobiography.
- 17 Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of being Ruled*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (1926; Santa Rosa CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 108.
- 18 *Hitler*, p. 83 (see note 9).
- 19 Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Grant Richards, 1927), pp. 302–306.
- 20 Wyndham Lewis, *Paleface: The Philosophy of the 'Melting-Pot'* (1929; New York: Gordon Press, 1972), p. 277.
- 21 Joan E. Gross and David A. McMurray, 'Berber Origins and the Politics of Ethnicity in Colonial North African Discourse,' *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 16, 2 (1993), 39–8.
- 22 L.L. Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples, and Languages*, trans. Mark Seielstad (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2000).
- 23 'It is a harsher, and at times even painful, office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less urgently needful for the good of mankind. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science'. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture Vol. II* (1871; London: John Murray, 1920), p. 453.

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Paul Edwards curated *Wyndham Lewis Portraits* at the National Portrait Gallery in 2008, and is preparing to do the same for a major Lewis exhibition at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid for 2010.

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